

Challenging the Curriculum: The Course of Studies in Buddhist Monasteries of Medieval Tibet and Beyond

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Curricula Conceptions

THE NOTION OF a “traditional Buddhist monastic curriculum” is frequently invoked in contemporary discourses about curricula reform,¹ relating to attempts to broaden and modernize the fields of Buddhist monastic learning and even develop “postcolonial” curricula.² Within such discourses, it is in contrast with the “new” or “modern” counterpart that the concept of a traditional curriculum seems to assume a clear definition. But what of the notion of Buddhist monastic curricula in premodern settings? Is the concept of such a curriculum so clearly defined without the benefit of the juxtaposition? Given monastic Buddhism’s long association with learning, it may seem unsurprising that the topic of monastic curricula is central to studies relating to monastic training in a wide variety of regional and historical settings, including Laos and Northern Thailand,³ Tibet,⁴ Sri Lanka,⁵ and Korea.⁶ It seems, however, that questions

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¹ See Kaplan 2015, pp. 14–60.

² See MacPherson 2006, pp. 88–90.

³ McDaniel 2008.

⁴ Dreyfus 2003.

⁵ Blackburn 2001, de Silva 2018.

⁶ Kaplan 2015. Some of the works cited in the notes above dedicate specific sections to aspects of historical curricula. These include the chapter by McDaniel subtitled, “Toward a Curricular History of Monastic Education” (2008, pp. 117–204), Dreyfus’s two chapters entitled, “The General Structure of Tibetan Curriculum” and “Two Curricular Models” (2003, pp. 98–110 and 111–48), and Blackburn’s “The Eighteenth-Century Curriculum: Four Levels of Study” (2001, pp. 55–60). For works dealing exclusively

about the *concept* of a curriculum in these settings are far from common. Considering, for a moment, the range of things to which the term “curriculum” has been applied, we see that in the context of monastic learning during the middle to late era of the Chosŏn 朝鮮 dynasty (1392–1910) in Korea⁷ and the Nara 奈良 (710–784) and Heian 平安 (794–1185) periods in Japan,⁸ it has been used to denote a prescribed group of subjects that formed the basis of graduated courses of study within highly organized academic systems, those in which a student’s progress was regulated through assembly-based examinations.⁹ By contrast, in the nonscholastic context of learning in Laos and Northern Thailand, “curriculum” has been used to refer to pedagogical materials, which served as informal “lecture notes,”¹⁰ that were “composed to guide sermon givers.”¹¹ Whereas in relation to seventeenth-century Tibet, “curriculum” has been used to denote an ideal set of monastic activities, embracing not just study, but also deportment, ritual performance, and meditational practice, which reportedly could be varied, in keeping with the individual’s capacities.¹²

There is, it seems fair to say, considerable variation and leeway with regard to the way the term has been employed. It might also be observed that “curriculum” does not appear, in such cases, to be used in an “assertive” manner: in none of these studies are academics presenting arguments about what does or does not constitute a curriculum, nor indeed do they seem, necessarily, to imply the existence of a single, homogenous, “curricula” category. “Curriculum” appears, rather, to serve primarily as a term of convenience, without any intended historical implications. In most (although not all) cases, those who rely on the term apparently wish only to convey *those things learned by Buddhist monks in monasteries*, and perhaps more specifically, those that might be seen to form part of a “training.” The tacit agreement regarding such usage does not appear to have been highlighted as potentially problematic. But it should be recognized that the term “curriculum” is one that, for the majority of us, is loaded with connotations. Readers may be keenly aware that the particular cultural context or point in history within which they are being called upon to conceive of a curriculum differs radically from their own. It may, nonetheless, prove difficult to separate the term from a common set of associations. “Curriculum” may seem almost naturally to connote educa-

with facets of monastic curricula in the Tibetan historical context see, among others, Tarab 2000, Dreyfus 2003, Jackson 2007, Caumanns 2015, Pearcey 2015, Fermer 2016, Hugon 2016, and Townsend 2017.

⁷ Lee 2012, Kaplan 2015.

⁸ Sango 2011, pp. 287–94.

⁹ Kaplan 2015, pp. 173–77; Sango 2011, pp. 287–94.

¹⁰ McDaniel 2008, p. 120.

¹¹ McDaniel 2008, p. 120. McDaniel examines genres of texts (*nissaya*, *vohāra*, and *nāmasadda*) that have medieval origins.

¹² Townsend 2017, pp. 9–11.

tional authorities, fully formed systems of learning, and overarching power structures, all of which might be quite foreign to the situation in hand.

Far more importantly, however, the somewhat liberal approach to usage of the term results in Buddhist monastic curricula being treated as virtually conterminous with the learning undertaken in a Buddhist monastic context. This is essentially to deny these curricula their own history. If there is insufficient agreement about what constitutes a curriculum to be able to conceive of such a thing as distinguishable from the institution of monastic learning itself, how is it possible to conceive, in historical terms, of curricula origin and evolution? Few are likely to be satisfied with the idea that the history of Buddhist monastic curricula must be understood within a very narrow set of parameters, particularly those that might be seen to derive, in some way, from the West. The term's historical emergence (in the West) may, therefore, be regarded as no more than an interesting footnote to discussion of the topic.¹³ Similarly, attempts such as those in Thailand from the eighteenth century onwards to "formalize the curriculum"¹⁴ in order to counter foreign missionary influence, may be viewed as later chapters, rather than formative events in the history of Buddhist monastic curricula. But to get serious about the history of such curricula, it first seems necessary to stop treating the validity of the term's usage in historical contexts as a given, and further, to consider what its usage might reasonably be expected to convey. Thus, one could well question what sense there is in referring to anything as a curriculum, unless it represented some form of organized learning, involving a set course of studies.¹⁵

Thinking about premodern notions of a curriculum in Buddhist monastic contexts, we may well wonder about indigenous vocabulary and concepts. The existence of direct equivalents for the term "curriculum" cannot be presumed, but the organization of learning seems necessarily to involve conceptual and perhaps even intellectual dimensions. The prospect of discovering more about native formulations within this sphere, such as, for instance, in medieval Tibet, might seem an enticing one. But in studies about historical Buddhist monasticism, it is not only those relating to Tibet¹⁶ that continuously refer to the notion of a curriculum without giving any indication whether it is being used to represent a term in primary sources. Indeed, these studies give us few clues about how any notions related to a curriculum are being expressed.

¹³ On the origins of the term "curriculum" itself, see Hamilton (1989) 2014, pp. 35–55. Identifying its earliest recorded usage as 1576, he posits Calvinist thinking behind its introduction into European universities ([1989] 2014, pp. 43–44, 55).

¹⁴ McDaniel 2005, p. 319.

¹⁵ The OED defines "curriculum" as "the subjects comprising a course of study in a school or college." Oxford English Dictionary. <https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/curriculum>.

¹⁶ See for example Dreyfus 2003, Jackson 2007, and Townsend 2017.

This greatly hinders attempts to understand developments in the curricula sphere and even raises questions (already alluded to) about the validity of the term's usage. While there may be little doubt that "curriculum" is an appropriate form of description in certain situations, to say anything meaningful about origin and evolution, it is necessary to look beyond mere content, to the ways that, on the abstract level, order may have been created in the sphere of learning. We can point to no direct equivalent, in Buddhist scriptural sources, for "curriculum": Buddhist monastic curricula are, necessarily, vernacular notions. But especially in studies related to Tibet, this vernacularism has largely been ignored.

Quite apart from content and the conceptual expression of organization, other aspects related to the formation of a curriculum warrant further investigation. Historically, Buddhist monastic learning may generally have been informed, in some sense, by scripture, but there is no single version of the Tripiṭaka on which it has been based. More importantly, purely on practical grounds, no version of the scriptural corpus could be described as a curriculum. No canon, in its entirety, has been regarded as a realistic basis for institutional learning. And although fundamental divisions, such as *abhidharma* and *vinaya*, are likely to be referenced, what individuals have actually ended up studying, in the institutional setting, has depended on selection, and very frequently, augmentation (with noncanonical materials). Such acts of mediation have necessarily involved the exercising of authority, with an individual or group assuming the right to select materials on behalf of the monastic community. Projections of authority have not only been evident in the choice of what has been studied, but also in judgements about proficiency related to the curriculum. Authority determines who is qualified to teach and the point at which the individual student's knowledge of a specified subject is sufficient; something for which practices of testing or regimes of examination have often been developed.

The understanding of these historical monastic curricula and their evolution lies not just in the identification of their content, as well as the vocabulary and concepts used to express them, but also in recognizing the processes by means of which certain materials have achieved the status of required learning on the institutional level. Several distinctions seem critical to understanding evolution in this sphere, but these could barely be expected to register within the "liberal" understanding of what constitutes a curriculum. The first is between materials (texts, subjects, or configurations of knowledge) and programs of study. The second is between topics that monastic authorities and cultures merely approve the study of and those that they prescribe. The third is between a monastery serving as a hub of knowledge or learning and its functioning as an educational institution. Attention to what separates the things that lie on either side of these divides and the points in history where shifts between them materialize would greatly aid our understanding of the curricula sphere.

The current article concentrates on the topic of medieval monastic curricula in Tibet. It deals separately with two things that in certain academic studies (identified below) have attracted the description “curriculum.” The first is a classification associated with Sakya Pandita (Sa skya paṇḍita, Kun dga’ rgyal mtshan; 1182–1251),¹⁷ that foremost scholar of the Sakya (Sa skya) school and one of Tibet’s most celebrated historical figures. The second relates to a scholastic title, linked particularly with Sangpu (gSang phu) Monastery, founded close to Lhasa in 1073. In neither case are the concerns here parochial. The aim is not to determine how studies were conducted in any single monastic institution—either Sakya Monastery (where Sakya Pandita presided) or Sangpu. Rather, it is to discover more about developments that may eventually have had profound and lasting effects on monastic learning throughout Tibet. The observations and analysis regarding the first are relatively brief: the main issue addressed is whether the designation “curriculum” is deserved. This leads us to a more nuanced picture of Sakya Pandita’s contribution to monastic learning. But the majority of the article is devoted to the second matter. It investigates not the whole history of curricula associated with Sangpu, but a specific event, which has been interpreted as signalling a shift in the curriculum. As such, it presents a case study, focusing on events between the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. The aim is not simply to understand the circumstances surrounding the event in question, but through their examination, to gain a much clearer picture of the organization of monastic learning at the time than we currently possess. As intimated above, underlying the analysis of both purported curricula are questions about *authority*; both its nature and projection. Relations between individuals and institutions, and the various assumptions made about them, come under particular scrutiny.

Sakya Pandita and the Monastic Curriculum

One of a number of highly influential works composed by Sakya Pandita was his *mKhas pa la ’jug pa’i sgo* (hereafter, *Entrance to Scholarship*),¹⁸ which has been described as “one of the few Tibetan texts that explicitly deals with scholasticism.”¹⁹ In this, he promoted the Indian pandit model (*paṇḍityam*) of learning.²⁰ It is also generally agreed that Sakya Pandita attempted to organize fields of knowledge in line with this vision. Both author and treatise have become inextricably associated with a tenfold division, of what are

¹⁷ To aid pronunciation, most Tibetan names in this article are rendered in a simplified transliteration form. Their correct spelling (according to the Wylie system) appears in parentheses.

¹⁸ For a partial translation and analysis, see Jackson 1987. For an analysis of the whole work, see Gold 2007.

¹⁹ Dreyfus 2003, p. 103.

²⁰ Dreyfus 2003, p. 103.

variously translated as the five major and five minor “branches of learning” or “sciences” (*rig pa'i gnas*),²¹ a classification that is virtually guaranteed a mention in any work dealing with Tibetan monastic learning. This classification has been referred to as a monastic “curriculum,” more generally in discussions on Tibetan divisions of knowledge,²² and more specifically in relation to Sakya Pandita.²³ But Dreyfus, in his extensive study on Tibetan monastic education, goes furthest in developing the idea that Sakya Pandita was responsible for creating a curriculum. Thus, Dreyfus describes the tenfold classification as “the general normative model of learning” in Tibet.²⁴ He also links the tenfold division specifically with another classification attributed to Sakya Pandita, a threefold formula—“expounding, debate, and composition” (*'chad rtsod rtsom*). Dreyfus notes a divide in approaches to monastic education that currently separates the centers of the Geluk (*dGe lugs*)—for centuries the largest and politically dominant school of Tibetan Buddhism—from those of the non-Geluk schools. He characterizes this divide, variously, as pedagogical (dialectical versus expository), institutional (the “debating institution” versus the “commentarial institution”), and “curricular.”²⁵ For the divide’s origins, Dreyfus looks back to medieval times. From the eleventh and twelfth centuries onwards, a particular brand of Buddhist monastic learning was developed at Sangpu Monastery. This placed special emphasis on logic and epistemology but excluded the study of tantra. That the Sangpu brand of learning greatly informed the scholastic approach of later Geluk centers is indisputable. But Dreyfus proposes that through the tenfold and threefold classifications, Sakya Pandita created his “paṇḍit model”²⁶ in contrast with the “dialectical model” of Sangpu.²⁷ Already in medieval times, therefore, he asserts the existence of these “models,” which he depicts as two distinct “approaches to education.”²⁸ The suggestion is that Sakya Pandita designed an educational model partly in reaction to the one developed at Sangpu (which he saw as a rival monastery) and that this model had its own curriculum.²⁹

²¹ Dreyfus (2003, p. 102) states, “The five major branches of learning are internal science (i.e., Buddhism, *nang rig pa*, *adhyātmavidyā*), logic and epistemology (*gtan tshigs rig pa*, *hetuvidyā*), grammar (*sgra rig pa*, *śabdavidyā*), medicine (*gso ba'i rig pa*, *cikitsāvidyā*), and arts and crafts (*bzo rig pa*, *karmasthānavidyā*).” He lists the minor ones as, “poetics (*snyan ngag*, *kāvya*), metrics (*sdeb sbyor*, *chandas*), lexicography (*mngon brjod*, *kośa* or *abhidhāna*), theater (*zlos gar*, *nāṭaka*), and astrology (arithmetic and astronomy but also astrology, *rtsis*, *gaṇita*).”

²² See for example Sobkovyak 2015, p. 61.

²³ See Gold 2007, p. 14, where he refers to Sakya Pandita’s “unified curriculum.”

²⁴ Dreyfus 2003, p. 101.

²⁵ Dreyfus 2003, p. 111.

²⁶ Dreyfus 2003, p. 139.

²⁷ Dreyfus 2003, p. 139.

²⁸ Dreyfus 2003, p. 139.

²⁹ Dreyfus 2003, pp. 104–5.

Certain historical details are not easy to reconcile with this portrayal. Various observations could be made about the threefold division.³⁰ But whatever Sakya Pandita's original intention for it, historically, it has predominantly been used simply as a pithy encapsulation of scholarly activity, invoked by individuals of every affiliation, not just those loyal to Sakya Pandita or the Sakya school.³¹ As a formulation, it is too vague to be associated with the advancement or rejection of any specific model of education and has no direct relationship with anything recognizable as a curriculum. We should, therefore, concentrate on the tenfold division. Sakya Pandita was innovative in the spheres of logic, epistemology, and literature. Certain criticisms he made of others appear to be directed at scholars linked with Sangpu Monastery. Accordingly, later medieval sources refer to two divergent systems.³² But the same sources clearly represent these as opposing systems of commentarial interpretation, *not* of education. If Sakya Pandita truly created a model of education, one might also reasonably expect to see signs of its introduction at Sakya Monastery, either during his life or soon after. But Shakya Rinchen Dei (Shā kya rin chen sde; d.u.), in his eminent history, *Yar lung jo bo'i chos 'byung*, composed in 1376, in a chapter devoted to the influence of the Sangpu traditions,³³ recounts how, within what can only have been a few decades of Sakya Pandita's demise, U Yugpa Rigpay Sengey ('U yug pa Rig pa'i seng ge; d. 1253)

³⁰ This article is not the place to evaluate the links that have been suggested between the divisions associated with Sakya Pandita and classifications within medieval European scholasticism. This would necessarily involve detailed examination of their content. Suffice it to say that there is some enthusiasm for identifying such parallels. Hence, while Dreyfus proposes a parallel between Sakya Pandita's threefold division and the European medieval "trivium" (2003, p. 103)—the topics of grammar, logic, and rhetoric—Jackson recommends an entirely different version of the Tibetan "trivium" (Jackson 2007, p. 346). It may be true that intriguing resemblances occasionally crop up within the two traditions. The most obvious and pertinent resemblance is, however, one that appears to have escaped attention. It is between Sakya Pandita's threefold division and one attributed to the Paris theologian, Peter Canter (d. 1197), consisting of "reading, disputing, and preaching" (*lectio, disputio, and praedicatio*; Novikoff 2013, p. 134). Canter's division is predicated on a particular form of education, but it neither describes the trivium, nor any specific set of disciplines (i.e., field of study). The same observation could well be made about Sakya Pandita's division. The real parallel between the two divisions is that they were both seen as prescribing the range of activities in which established scholars (pandit and theologian, respectively) were supposed to engage.

³¹ In the *Deb ther dmar po* (Red Annals), for instance (composed ca. 1363 by Tselpa Kunga Dorje [Tshal pa Kun dga' rdo rje]), as on many other occasions, it is in relation to the activities of Ngok Loden Sherab (rNgog Blo ldan shes rab; 1059–1109), in the context of describing the Sangpu traditions, that the "expounding, debating, and composition" trope is referenced (Tshal pa Kun dga' rdo rje 1993, p. 67).

³² The formula *sa rngogs lugs*, "the traditions of Sa and Ngok" (where "Sa" refers to Sakya Pandita or Sakya Monastery and "Ngok" refers to Ngok Loden Sherab, the influential second abbot of Sangpu, and by extension, Sangpu Monastery itself) is often used to represent the two in a contrastive sense.

³³ Numerous other medieval religious histories contain similar sections, detailing the spread of the Sangpu model via its study institutions, but there are no comparable sections in which a Sakya model is represented.

“introduced a (Sangpu-style) study branch at Sakya monastery.”³⁴ As already stated, Sangpu was associated with a particular brand of learning, which, as this passage indicates, was disseminated through various satellite branches. Historically, there is nothing comparable associated with any “Sakya Pandita model.” Furthermore, by the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, when scholastic activities were at their peak, we see no evidence of competing approaches to education within the monastic sphere. Sakya Pandita’s ideas had largely been absorbed into what had come to be seen as a shared scholastic tradition, allowing monks, almost irrespective of personal affiliations, to move freely between monastic centers in search of learning and testing. Sources from the time report no institutional divides (between, for instance, those favoring dialectical over expository models), nor that it was necessary for monks to navigate contrasting systems. Differences in the commentarial and philosophical spheres were real ones, but it cannot simply be presumed that these translated into approaches to education, and no substantive evidence that they did has been presented. The two spheres should not be conflated: if the commentarial domain of the time could be likened to a broad church, the educational one may, in some respects, have been closer to a unified one.³⁵

Even those who explicitly identify Sakya Pandita’s classification with a curriculum qualify this with remarks about its limited success in terms of implementation.³⁶ But for anyone with an interest in the history of education in Tibet, it is exactly these practical dimensions, outside the realm of theory, that are likely to be regarded as the most important. As discussed below, historical references to Sakya Pandita’s classification are numerous. But it is difficult to substantiate the idea that monasteries in medieval times set out to organize education according to Sakya Pandita’s model, within which the tenfold division might have served as the basis of a curriculum. Later centuries brought changes. During the nineteenth to twentieth centuries, some in non-Geluk schools sought to counter Geluk dominance. There was renewed interest in Sakya Pandita’s writings, for precisely the reason that they seemed to offer an alternative scholastic approach to the one pursued in the Geluk institutions. This undoubtedly impacted on the non-Geluk monastic centers of learning founded during that time. But there is little to suggest that we are dealing here with institutional continuity, stretching back to the medieval period.

Quite aside from the issue of implementation, looking at the content of the division, there must be a question whether “curriculum” is an accurate description. The classification of topics in the “major” category was inherited from India,³⁷ and it is generally cited as evidence of Tibetan fidelity to a Buddhist Sanskritic model of learn-

³⁴ *’u yug pas sa skyar bshad grwa btsugs*. Shā kya rin chen sde 1988, pp. 132–33.

³⁵ The question of whether this extended to curricula unification is discussed below.

³⁶ Dreyfus 2003, p. 105; Gold 2007, p. 14.

³⁷ Sobkovyak 2015, p. 60.

ing. There has been general agreement on the five topics in question,³⁸ but far less on what each actually represent. Only with the category of logic, and to a lesser extent, that of medicine, has there been something like an agreed corpus of writings. What is ostensibly the main category (*nang don rig pa*; Skt. *adhyātmavidyā*), which Dreyfus translates as “Buddhism,”³⁹ literally means “inner learning.” While most Tibetan scholars have asserted that it refers to textual studies, it can equally be interpreted as affirming the primacy of meditative knowledge, and therefore something less than a wholehearted endorsement of the scholastic approach. The category of “grammar” originally dealt with Sanskrit, but this eventually morphed into the study of Tibetan linguistic elements, while the category of “arts” seems always to have been nebulous almost to the point of incoherence. In brief, many aspects of these categories are ill-defined and ambiguous. However much this results from the way they have been stretched and remoulded to aid assimilation, the idea that the Tibetan historical writers who describe them are presenting us with a genuine course or program of studies is unconvincing.

Sakya Pandita’s real contribution here was in terms of topics in the “minor” division. This is despite the fact that his *Entrance to Scholarship* contains no explicit reference to it nor at any point mentions a tenfold division. The solidification and promotion of the tenfold classification, with its internal, major-minor distinction, appears mainly to have been the work of his successors. It is true, however, that presenting the five as a secondary, but highly important group of topics was congruent with Sakya Pandita’s own thinking.⁴⁰ He shared with his contemporaries an interest in Sanskrit writings, but he was also especially enamored with a strain of Buddhist intellectualism that prized florid, stylistic, Sanskrit literature. Sakya Pandita frames his *Entrance to Scholarship* with the question, “What is a scholar?”⁴¹ In answer to this he proceeds to construct the paradigmatic image of the “truly” learned Buddhist (*mkhas pa*).⁴² This he

³⁸ Sobkoyak represents the five as, “grammar, logic, the inner science (Buddhist philosophy), medicine, and the arts” (2015, pp. 59–60).

³⁹ Dreyfus 2003, p. 101.

⁴⁰ Only at two points in the work (Sa skya Paṇḍita 1992, pp. 371–72, 453) does the author mention the five major fields. No overt reference to a “minor” category (fivefold or otherwise) is made, although topics now organized under that rubric appear together with the five belonging to the “major” category.

⁴¹ *mkhas pa zhes bya ba gang yin zhe na* (Sa skya Paṇḍita 1992, p. 372). See also Jackson 1987, vol. 1, p. 3.

⁴² The translation “scholar” for *mkhas pa* is entirely contextual. In other works, Sakya Pandita develops different dimensions of the term/concept, relating more to worldly wisdom, morality, etc., than erudition. His *Entrance to Scholarship* also seems to use an earlier treatise, composed in 1167 by Sönam Tsemo (bSod nams rtse mo; 1142–1182), entitled *Entrance to the Dharma* (*Chos la ’jug pa’i sgo*), which promotes the image of a pious, religious aspirant, as a foil for construction of a parallel (scholarly) identity.

defines more in terms of knowledge of treatises and fields of learning than any faculty for critical thinking. The topics of the “minor” category had their origins in Sanskrit literary learning and were again not Sakya Pandita’s creation. But he employed his vision of the scholarly ideal to promote them in Tibet, and in his *Entrance to Scholarship* he suggests certain treatises of Sanskrit origin that might serve as the bases for their study.⁴³

The tenfold division represents much more than a classification of branches of knowledge. In its structural and strategic dimensions, it is a scheme. Following a template common in the systematization and organization of knowledge by those representing established religions, it seeks to (1) privilege religious knowledge, and (2) circumscribe boundaries related to it. The first it achieves partly through stratification. Religious knowledge is placed in a separate, ascendant (or transcendent) category. This hierarchy is also enforced by means of attendant suborganizations.⁴⁴ A scheme that subordinates other forms of knowledge to the overtly religious might be deployed to justify and reinforce religious exclusivity or elitism. But Sakya Pandita and his successors seemed more concerned with constructive manipulation of the scheme. It portrays certain forms of knowledge (other than the overtly religious) as “inferior,” but their mere inclusion bestows on them a degree of “worthiness.” This partial ennoblement legitimizes them as areas of interest for religious practitioners. By engineering this new vision of the Buddhist scholar, and presenting Sanskritic literary learning as integral to the identity of such an individual, Sakya Pandita and his followers sought to secure widespread acceptance for a raft of topics that were, for them, objects of personal passion. The “religious” credentials of some of these might seem dubious. It is especially difficult to imagine how *kāvya*, a genre of courtly poetry, which still attracts criticism for its “unmonkly” themes, would have gained the prominence it subsequently enjoyed had it not been depicted as fundamental to the noble ideal. As already hinted, the Sanskritic vision of learning did not, in any real sense, endure. And in contrast with *kāvya*’s abiding success, Sanskrit learning itself never became mainstream.

Two observations about the classification that are relevant to the issue of a curriculum can be made. Dreyfus claims that most of the ten branches were frequently left out of the monastic curriculum on the grounds that they were judged “secular.”⁴⁵ But for understanding monastic involvement in some of these fields, the notion of a secular-religious divide has limitations. The topic of medicine, for instance, may not have been a standard feature of monastic curricula in institutions focused on scholastic

⁴³ Sa skya Paṇḍita 1992, pp. 371–72. This is not presented as a comprehensive list and could not accurately be characterized as a syllabus.

⁴⁴ These are the distinctions between the “major-minor” (*che-chung*), “internal-external” (*nang-phyi*), and “uncommon-common” (*thung mong min pa-thun mong*).

⁴⁵ Dreyfus 2003, p. 102.

learning. But it has still been regarded as a natural area of interest for Tibetan monastics more generally, and in the postmedieval era, some specialist medical colleges have been populated exclusively by monastics. In this matter we are reminded of a perennial discourse between members of the monastic and non-monastic communities on what fields of interest and learning, beyond the scriptural and professedly religious, were appropriate for monks, or more pointedly, those which, due to being regarded as inconsistent with the monk's role, should be subject to proscription. In the context of medieval Sri Lankan *pirivenas* (i.e., Buddhist monastic centers), a twelfth-century royal decree reportedly banned the study of "poetry, drama, and such other base subjects."⁴⁶ Certain topics have recurrently been disputed territory. Most conspicuous here are a spectrum of literary subjects, especially forms of poetry and narrative with prominent "worldly" themes, astrology, divination, and occasionally, aspects of language learning. The number of times that the tenfold scheme has been evoked can leave no doubt that it has for centuries served as a device legitimizing Tibetan monastic interest in these areas, providing some degree of official sanction, and thereby quelling the potential for disputes that have, in other Buddhist contexts, necessitated other forms of intercession.

The second observation relates to the actual effect of the tenfold scheme on institutional learning. Since the late medieval period, hagiographies have proudly declared their subjects to be masters of the topics embraced by the tenfold classification. These writings also, sporadically, contain details (including references to texts and teachers) that seemingly support the idea of a role for the classification in the organization of learning. But it is the claims themselves that should be seen as normative. Sakya Pandita and his followers were entirely successful in establishing the image of a consummate scholar. If references to the classification increase, this is probably because anyone who sought to project himself (or another subject) as a genuine scholar simply could not afford to suggest deficiencies in his learning. The description, "master of the ten branches of learning" (*rig pa'i gnas bcu la mkhas pa*) should be recognized as a literary idiom. When mastery is claimed for an individual, it can neither be understood to reliably reflect what he (or very rarely, she) had studied, nor what monastic centers of the time offered in terms of institutional learning. This "master" was not a specific title. There seemed to be no set criteria for mastery of the ten categories. As such, this "qualification" was largely one that was self-proclaimed or conferred by disciples. The evidence in biographical writings is entirely consistent with *informal* learning; something that owed more to personal inclination and chance opportunity than any predetermined program. As *kāvya* was viewed as emblematic, presumably few would dare to claim "mastery of the ten branches" without some formal study of the subject. But with regards to the remainder of the minor branches, there are reasons for doubting the

⁴⁶ Deegalle 2004, p. 248.

substance behind many claims. And the idea that during the medieval period there was any form of standard monastic education, in which topics such as arts and crafts or theater constituted some form of curriculum, is one that cannot seriously be entertained.

With such vagueness about the tenfold scheme's contents, and questions about its historical implementation, it would hardly seem to meet the standards of what might reasonably be expected of a curriculum. The scheme's association with Sakya Pandita has surely been a factor in some academic studies choosing to describe it as such. The assumption, perhaps, is that something emanating from such a towering figure of authority must have been expressed on an institutional level. But that would rest on a highly questionable understanding about the literary sphere's relation to the real world, and perhaps even the failure to distinguish between the two.

Issues of Curricula Enumeration: A Historical Case Study

The remainder of this article examines a specific historical event and seeks to understand how it relates to curricula evolution. By no later than the fourteenth century, titles seeming to warrant the description "scholastic" emerged in Tibet. Several of these titles contain numbers.⁴⁷ These are interpreted as references to particular sets of subjects that individuals were required to study in order to gain the title. The awarding of titles was linked with a regime of testing. The subjects alluded to in the titles, therefore, have been understood as a course of studies; something for which the term "curriculum" may be seen as appropriate.⁴⁸ On a scale that is without precedent elsewhere in Tibetan history, a series of rapid changes occurred in the names of these titles within a fifty-year period (approximately 1385–1435). Towards the close of the fourteenth century, there appears to have been a commonly accepted, premier title. But within a few decades, two new "highest" titles successively appeared. The numbers referenced in them grew from "four," to "ten," to "myriad." Here we are particularly interested in the first documented shift; the question is why the so-called "ten pillars" (*ka bcu*) title was introduced, where the "four pillars" (*ka bzhi*) had previously sufficed. What exactly was this an expansion of, what circumstances led to it, and to what extent did it represent an evolutionary stage in the concept of a curriculum?⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Jackson was the first to directly address the evolution of scholarly titles during the medieval period. He suggests that scholastic titles and degrees already existed prior to the appearance of the first "numbered" version at the beginning of the fourteenth century. Jackson 2007, pp. 346–47.

⁴⁸ For further details see Jackson 2007.

⁴⁹ Sources do not agree on the spelling for the titles. They are either the four, ten, etc., "pillars," "difficult (areas)," or "authoritative (subjects)," depending on which of the homophonous variations (*ka*, *dka'*, or *bka'*) of the titles' first syllable is treated as definitive. I have chosen to follow the first variant, which frequently appears in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century writings (although subsequently, it was

Jackson dates the sequential emergence of these titles.⁵⁰ He talks of how one title was “augmented”⁵¹ by another, and seems to interpret the shifts as reflecting evolutionary expansions of the curriculum, culminating in the creation of a final degree, which he believes “must have designated the entire agreed upon corpus of about eighteen texts.”⁵² Based on the position that the topics of the “four pillars” title are identifiable (as *prajñāpāramitā*, *pramāṇa*, *abhidharma*, and *vinaya*), Jackson thinks that the same should be true for its successors. Thus, he attempts to identify the texts associated with the two later titles (see below). With regard to the first, Jackson claims that, “testing in ten scriptures had become a fixed practice for advanced scholars in the reputable seminaries of dBus province in that time.”⁵³ This gives the impression of a single scholastic curriculum, perhaps even within a unified scholastic system.⁵⁴ He does not state why Tibetan medieval scholasticism should be understood in such singular terms. But the implication appears to be that a unified system would have required such an agreed curriculum and, furthermore, that only an authoritative body working on behalf of such a system would have had the power necessary to undertake curricula expansion. Such assumptions might be sound if the systems and institutions of the time were comparable with those of the contemporary world, but this is something that has not been demonstrated.

There are, in fact, reasons for thinking that there was some variation with regard to the “four pillars,” and that the title’s existence does not constitute evidence of a standardized educational system, as it might be understood today.⁵⁵ Jackson’s attempts to isolate the texts of the putative “ten-work curriculum”⁵⁶ and its successor are also, it should be noted, conjectural. He identifies texts that *might* have fitted the bill. But he supplies no historical evidence that the works in question were ever described as, conceived of, or actually formed anything akin to a “curriculum” during the decades in question. Jackson also says that the third title, known as the “myriad” (*rab ’byams*), was

largely superseded by the other two). These spelling variations do not correlate with any detectable changes in the titles/degrees themselves. Whether they reflect changing conceptions of titles/degrees is less clear.

⁵⁰ Jackson 2007. These could not be characterized, strictly speaking, as discrete evolutionary stages, because the three titles coexisted for some time. Only in the seventeenth century did the “myriad” (*rab ’byams*) title finally reign supreme.

⁵¹ Jackson 2007, p. 347.

⁵² Jackson 2007, p. 347.

⁵³ Jackson 2007, p. 346. Jackson refers to “scriptures” rather than “pillars,” following the third spelling variation (i.e., *bka’*) mentioned in n. 49.

⁵⁴ As corroborated, for example, by Hugon’s representation of Jackson’s position; see Hugon 2016, p. 305, n. 61.

⁵⁵ For more on this, see Samuels 2020b.

⁵⁶ Jackson 2007, p. 348.

associated with an established curriculum—a set of texts that he comes close to equating with a group of eighteen texts (*grags chen bco brgyad*) eventually favored by the Sakya school. But again, he provides no historical evidence that this third title was specifically associated with this or indeed any other group of eighteen texts. Neither does he take into account the fact that by the mid-fifteenth century, different institutions, including those of the first Geluk (or dGe ldan) monasteries, which were asserting an identity distinct from the Sakya and others, were awarding their own versions of titles by that name. Although we may talk of a scholastic system, the extent that standards and practices related to education within that system were unified must not be exaggerated. Attempts to identify a single monastic curriculum, within such a system, based on a universally agreed corpus of texts, are vulnerable to the charge of essentialization.

Curricula expansion seems to be put forward as the way to explain the appearance of new titles. But there is something very passive about this notion of expansion. No reasons are given as to why, at this particular historical juncture, it should have occurred. Curricula expansion might seem credible if new compositions or translations had appeared on the scene, but all the texts cited by Jackson⁵⁷ had been available for several centuries. What developments in institutions or society, and what decisions and debates, might have lain behind these changes? And what certainty is there that the new titles were linked with curricula expansion? To address any of these questions it is necessary to investigate the circumstances behind the appearance of the new titles.

Some academic studies on biographical writings about medieval Tibetan scholars present a rather different understanding of the monastic curriculum than one limited to the aforementioned four or ten subjects. Biographies from the period often contain separate chapters or sections devoted to the scholastic education of their subjects, which include details of tests they undertook, titles they received, and texts they studied. Correspondingly, studies may deal with this material in individual sections,⁵⁸ in which reference to terms like “curriculum” are frequent.⁵⁹ Some direct relationship between the list of texts and a monastic curriculum is suggested, but the exact nature of this is not spelt out. The implications of such a relationship are, therefore, not explored. Such biographical writings may present us with a list of fifty or sixty texts.⁶⁰ Such a litany is demonstrably intended to advertise the superiority and peculiar

⁵⁷ Jackson 2007, pp. 348–50.

⁵⁸ See for example Caumanns 2015, pp. 39–85.

⁵⁹ Caumanns 2015, pp. 58–59.

⁶⁰ The biography of Rongtön Sheja Kunrig (Rong ston Shes bya kun rig, 1367–1449), *Ngo mtshar dad pa'i rol mtsho*, written by Shakya Chokden (Shākya mchog ldan; 1428–1507), for instance, contains just such a list. It refers to sixty texts that its subject is said to have mastered, forty of which he is reported to have taught about extensively (Shākya mchog ldan 2004, p. 28). Significantly, these enumerations appear immediately after remarks about testing.

breadth of its subject's scholastic endeavors. But how could it simultaneously constitute a monastic curriculum? What explains the huge disparity between the numbers in the titles and those on the lists (i.e., ten versus tens)? And how might a monastic institution have organized learning and conducted examination on sixty or so texts? The reason why such lists appear in the context of discussions about testing is identified below, but while they may be records of works studied by an individual, they do not relate directly to examinations associated with any form of curriculum (concrete or otherwise). Any serious engagement with the concept of a curriculum itself, and the aspects of demarcation and organized education that give sense to the term's usage, immediately make this apparent. It is necessary, therefore, to identify certain Tibetan terms and concepts used during the period in question and consider their role in the organization of learning.

Academic Terms: Indigenous Concepts, Historical Contexts

Terms that might currently be presented as Tibetan equivalents of “curriculum” are invariably neologisms, and no single term, in either demotic or literary lexicons, could be said to denote a traditional conception of a curriculum. But concentrating specifically on the period of approximately five decades already identified, two terms that in other contexts are translated as “text” and “Dharma” respectively—*gzhung* and *chos*—seem significant. Growing ideation around them translated into the organizational and institutional spheres, and one of the products of this was a concept seemingly approaching that of a curriculum. Even when translated simply as “text,” *gzhung* connotes authority, and indeed in other contexts, means “government.”⁶¹ This association with authority was key in the development of another concept, the *gzhung chen*, which is literally rendered simply “great text.” The *gzhung chen* came to represent something akin to a “major authoritative work”—one with sufficient substance to warrant its own commentaries. Within the scholastic sphere, such works were eventually viewed as forming a category—an isolable collection of texts invested with particular authority. In subsequent centuries, the various collections that served as the basis for organized monastic learning crystallized around this concept. Thus, we have the primarily Sakya conception of the category, with the aforementioned “eighteen authoritative works” or “famed eighteen works” (*gzhung chen bco brgyad; grags chen bco brgyad*), the “five authoritative tomes” (*gzhung chen po ti lnga*) of Geluk scholasticism, and the “thirteen authoritative works” (*gzhung chen bcu gsum*), popularized in Nyingma (rNying ma) monasteries and beyond. All of these became central to

⁶¹ The “text” gloss is attested in documents from imperial times (seventh to ninth centuries), whereas the “government” provenance is less clear, although the two appear to have informed each other for a number of centuries.

standardized forms of monastic education, and in these later contexts, can be described as “curricula.”⁶²

The concept of the “authoritative work” as a superior, commentary-worthy category of texts was well established by the time in question. But it had not yet solidified into the settled collections of later times (such as the five, eighteen, and thirteen)—those that would develop into virtual (and closed) canons. The same term (*gzhung chen*) also appears to have been associated specifically with the scholastic approach favored at Sangpu. In reference to the tradition, Gö Lotsawa (’Gos lo tsā ba, 1392–1481), in his *Deb ther sngon po* (Blue Annals), referred to “those who compose explanations on the authoritative works,”⁶³ that is, following the example set by Ngok Loden Sherab, those who studied the major Indian Buddhist treatises not directly, but through commentaries written by Tibetan scholastics.⁶⁴ Underlying subsequent debates about what texts did and did not belong to the embryonic category (and to some extent also, discourse about their commentaries) was the issue of *representativeness*: Which works, in particular areas of Buddhist learning, were the definitive ones, and indeed what were the essential areas of learning? These will be elaborated on below.

Authority was axiomatic to the concept of the *gzhung chen*, but the category was not used to create a prescriptive-proscriptive divide with respect to learning. Monks were not prohibited from studying texts that fell outside the bounds of the collections. The realm of monastic learning could best be understood in terms of a three-way divide. Between the “authoritative works” and areas that were totally off-limits to monastics was an intermediary territory, occupied by a wide range of fields, topics, and writings. Included within it were some of the same topics, such as poetry, medicine, and divination, that the tenfold classification appeared to sanction, but which, in reality, have enjoyed fluctuating relations with “official” monastic learning, depending on historical and regional variables, as well as the inclinations of individual schools and institutions. This category also included the topic of tantra, and it is clear from medieval biographies that the acquisition of knowledge and engagement in activities related to tantra were not so much permitted, as expected. Those who were involved in scholastic pursuits simultaneously sought teaching and instruction on tantra, poetry, and other subjects. Given that a keen interest in such subjects appears to have bordered on a requirement, it is difficult to represent them as “extra-curricular”; simply choosing to ignore them seems not to have been an option for the individuals concerned. Furthermore, the monks who received teachings on tantra would often do so in the very same monasteries where they pursued

⁶² For more on such curricula in contemporary monastic settings, see Dreyfus 2003, pp. 111–48. For more on the thirteenfold collection, see Pearcey 2015.

⁶³ “*gzhung chen po’i bshad pa mdzad pa rnams*” (’Gos lo gZhon nu dpal 1984, p. 399).

⁶⁴ The individual “authoritative works” are almost exclusively Sanskrit in origin. The only obvious exception to this is discussed below.

their main scholastic activities (and occasionally rely on the same teachers). This might be seen to pose challenges to the idea that a monastic curriculum existed at the time. The notion of a curriculum might seem to lose real sense if the study of topics outside it was, on the institutional level, encouraged, expected, and apparently even facilitated. But here it is perhaps useful to recall the distinctions referred to in the introduction. These medieval monasteries undoubtedly served as hubs of intellectual activity. They housed resident communities and a steady flow of itinerant scholars passed through them. Their existence increased the likelihood of encounters between those seeking knowledge and those prepared to impart it. But with topics such as tantra, however benign an environment these centers proved to be, the monastic authorities do not appear to have taken an active role in organizing or regulating their learning. In this crucial regard their study was distinguished from that of the topics discussed below. They may well be judged, therefore, to fall outside the domain of what can reasonably be described as a “curriculum.”⁶⁵

Let us look more deeply into how, during the medieval period in question, learning was organized in Tibetan monasteries, and what part in this organization concepts relevant to a curriculum might have played.⁶⁶ We refer here to Tibetan monasteries following the scholastic approach originally developed at Sangpu.⁶⁷ The term *chos* has a range of more familiar glosses (e.g., “Dharma,” “Buddhism,” and “religion”), but had more specific and technical meanings within this medieval context. In the biography of Shakya Chokden (Shākya mchog ldan; 1428–1507), we find it combined with the aforementioned word for “text,” to form *gzhung chos*. This delineates works that belong to a nascent category,⁶⁸ seemingly the precursor to the notion of a settled “curriculum,”

⁶⁵ Regarding medieval Buddhist monastic contexts other than those of Tibet, McDaniel says, “the primary content of the monastic curriculum for Laos and Northern Thailand consisted of ritual (both protective and daily monastic liturgies), grammatica, and ethical and romantic narratives” (McDaniel 2008, p. 127). Similarly, with regard to Sri Lanka, Deegalle informs us that, “the curriculum of the fifteenth-century Pirivena included a mastery of several languages (Sinhala, Pāli, Sanskrit, Prakrit, and Tamil), plus the study of the Pāli canon, Mahayana philosophical texts, Indian philosophy, mathematics, architecture, astronomy, medicine, and astrology” (Deegalle 2004, p. 248). These describe the range of topics embraced within the context of differing forms of institutionalized, monastic learning. As mentioned in the introduction, for most of us, “curriculum” has implications of organized courses and programs of study, with required learning, quality control, and examinations. Reflecting on whether “curriculum” is the most appropriate term for describing all of the topics that a monk might or could have learned within a particular setting might seem like a worthwhile exercise.

⁶⁶ The details for this section are drawn primarily from contemporary biographical materials, such as those cited at more length below.

⁶⁷ The term *mtshan nyid*, which is currently translated simply as “dialectical,” was coined in the early medieval period and encapsulated the Sangpu approach. For more on the historical use of this term/concept in relation to Tibetan scholasticism, see Samuels 2020a.

⁶⁸ This text (*Shākya mchog ldan gyi rnam thar zhib mo rnam 'thag*) is discussed at length by Caumanns (2015). It presents a vivid picture of the scholastic scene during the period in question, and it uses the term *gzhung chos* frequently (e.g., pp. 13b, 14a, 19a). Despite its heavy reliance on

but to avoid prejudgement, should provisionally be translated as “core texts.” More significantly, *chos* served as a delineator, conceptually and organizationally. In monastic centers, institutional learning was organized around a calendar of four “sessions” (*chos thog*), based on the four seasons—that is, spring session, summer session, autumn session, and winter session.⁶⁹ Official session time (sometimes referred to as *dus chos*), was interspersed with “session breaks” (*chos dbar*). During breaks, monks seem to have enjoyed freedom to travel, seek a greater range of teachings, and engage in activities other than study (including meditational retreats, pilgrimages, visits to family, and management of personal affairs). But during session time, their presence in the centers was expected or required. Hence, *chos* was used as a delineator of “official” activities, including the teachings and tests that formed part of the course of studies. The biography of Tsong Khapa (Tsong kha pa, Blo bzang grags pa; 1357–1419), for instance, relates how Sakya Monastery was not in study session when he first arrived. He took private instruction elsewhere in the interregnum, before returning there to take a test on the topic of *prajñāpāramitā* when the scholastic session reconvened.⁷⁰

Informally, during the session breaks, monks could privately approach individuals of their choosing for teachings, either within or beyond the monastery’s confines, on the core texts or other subjects. During session time, energies were apparently more focused on that official core. Outside administrative roles, monastic centers made official teaching appointments. Those holding such posts (*slob dpon* and *zur chos pa*) were required to provide instruction on the official core, although the system also accommodated learning with visiting teachers. Teachings on the official core must have involved gatherings of students, as opposed to purely private instruction, although I have yet to see unequivocal references to “classes.” Such matters may have been judged too prosaic for inclusion in religious biographies, although the nomenclature and indeed the “class culture” that is evident in later writings may still have been at a formative stage. There can be no doubt, however, that knowledge transmission in these monastic centers represented a radical departure from what might normally be described as the traditional model. The restrictive controls imposed on the imparting of specialist knowledge and skill were found not just in the religious domain (relating to esoteric or private instructions), but in all sorts of areas (healing, artisanship, and so forth) and were intertwined

earlier biographies, it was composed some years after the events it describes by Kunga Drölchok (Kun dga’ grol mchog; 1507–1566). Concepts such as *gzhung chos* may well have gelled significantly during the intervening decades.

⁶⁹ That is, *sos chos*, *dbyar chos*, *ston chos*, and *dgun chos*. The first also has the variants *spyid chos* and *srod chos*.

⁷⁰ The text, entitled *rJe btsun tsong kha pa chen po’i rmad du byung ba’i rnam par thar pa dad pa’i ’jug ngog*, was composed by Khedrup Geleg Pelzang (mKhas grub dGe legs dpal bzang; 1385–1438), and contains the passage, *sa skya’i dus chos ma tshugs kyi ring . . . chos tshugs nas sa skyar phar phyin kyi grwa skor mdzad* (mKhas grub dGe legs dpal bzang 1982, p. 20).

with notions and mechanisms of inheritance, and therefore protected. But here, these controls were simply removed. The scholastic model was one of mass learning, in which the idea of “lineage” (*rgyud pa*) transmission was dispensed with. Although again, precise details about them are sparse, other activities associated with this form of organized learning were decidedly public. Debates and discourse were conducted openly, before the monastic assembly, and appear to have been predicated on collective participation. The public dimension was also central to testing and examination. Processes were not entirely standardized, but the existence of testing regimes and the awarding of titles clearly demonstrate that learning was constituted of courses of study, with defined endpoints. The organization and structure involved was that which many would associate with a system of education.⁷¹

Aside from these activities and practices, signs of organized learning are found in the literature that was generated and employed within these monastic centers. The fundamentals of learning seem not to have been the province of the monastic centers; most accounts suggest that basic literacy skills were acquired informally, through family and local networks. The centers concerned themselves primarily with “higher” learning. The scholastic tradition’s relationship with scripture became a remote one. It was far more interested in the “authoritative works”—the commentarial writings on scripture, translated from Sanskrit.⁷² As stated above, these were, in turn, generally approached through the medium of native writings. The “summaries” (*bsdul/s pa*) genre of works, first developed at Sangpu, gathered and systematized information from Indian texts. But they also added new material, expressly so that they could serve as primers. In contrast with the Thai and Laotian materials examined by McDaniel, which speak of nonstandardized teaching adapted to fit localized, vernacular, and personalized settings, these works were intended to serve a system of graduated, group learning, which sought to transcend such differences. The Tibetan primers not only prepared students for study by introducing them to the basic taxonomies and epistemology dealt with in Indian and Tibetan scholarly writings, but also the basics of disputation practice. These works increasingly followed a dialectical format, reflecting the pedagogical context within which they were designed to be used. By the fifteenth century, probably following the lead established in the primers, many of the materials used for studying the Indian treatises had dispensed entirely with exegesis and were constructed almost solely of debates. Texts following such formats subsequently took on the status of what is generally referred to as “manuals” (*yig cha*), which came to dominate learning in Geluk scholasticism.

In general terms, contemporary scholasticism, especially as practiced in the Geluk centers, retains the same relation to the two strata of works (Indian and Tibetan) as its

⁷¹ For more details of scholastic practices of the time, see Samuels 2020b.

⁷² See Dreyfus 2005, p. 285.

medieval counterpart. The five topics studied in the Geluk centers, like those of the “four pillars” in medieval times, are approached through Tibetan writings. But in one important respect, the traditions differ. Currently, membership of a monastic “college” (*grwa tshang*) obliges the individual to one interpretational line: the positions set out in the manuals used by that institution. In medieval times, monastic centers such as Sangpu had a far more liberal, multivocal approach. Regarding the subjects of the “four pillars,” institutions may have favored the lines of interpretation set forth in specific texts, or by certain writers—those that seemed to have formed the basis of teachings by the “staff.” But monks studying there could also seek teachings by other writers, whose works differed in interpretation. How many alternative lines of interpretation beyond the favored one each monk gained exposure to seems to have been a matter of personal discretion. Even during testing, there was apparently no insistence that a monk follow the favored line of the monastery. An anecdote in Shakya Chokden’s biography, for example, suggests that the abbot of lower Sangpu, privately, and somewhat surreptitiously, communicated to Shakya Chokden that he approved of the commentary he had chosen to base his answers on during his *prajñāpāramitā* examination, despite its not being the official one used in the monastery.⁷³

To sum up, in a number of respects, monastic learning during the time had already taken a shape that is still recognizable in the contemporary Tibetan scholastic system. Institutions and practices had coalesced into a coherent, structured system of learning. In the area that might now be described as “curricula,” however, there were certain significant differences from today. Despite evidence that some notion of official areas of study existed (expressed partly by terminology such as *gzhung chos*) and that learning within monastic institutions was organized around these, the contents of these categories were not fixed. This was true both to the core Sanskrit-origin works and their Tibetan commentarial writings. Some degree of fluidity existed and processes of negotiation leading to their eventual solidification were still underway, a point amply demonstrated by the discussion that follows.

Strength in Numbers: Are Ten Pillars Preferable to Four?

The foregoing description places us in a better position to appreciate the significance of the emergence of the use of the “ten pillars,” and its relevance to the issue of monastic curricula. As already stated, prior to the title’s appearance, the “four pillars” had prevailed, and the apparent growth in numbers (reflected in the names) has been portrayed as a straightforward curricula expansion. But a number of doubts have been raised here about this understanding. It seems to take the notion of a curriculum for

⁷³ The work in question was *mNgon rtogs rgyan gyi rnam bshad tshig don rab gsal* (*Rong tik*), composed by Rongtön. The anecdote is recounted in Kun dga’ grol mchog, n.d., p. 11a.

granted; it is something that sits apart from the process of expansion to which it is supposed to be subject. But it also seems to be seen as nothing more than an agreed group of core texts. There is no sense that a curriculum must be conceived of and explained in terms of courses of study and programs of education. Furthermore, the passive way that the presence of a curriculum is understood means that no convincing explanation has been provided for how and why this expansion should have occurred. With regard to developments in the curricula-linked scholastic titles there are also questions about origin and agency. Monastic centers were clearly involved in the conferring of these titles. Based on this, it has been presumed that only the centers themselves would have had sufficient authority to bring about major changes and, by extension, must also have been responsible for initiating them. These are all points that should be kept in mind as we look into the events surrounding the shift.

Embedded within traditional Tibetan narrative more generally is something resembling Thomas Carlyle's "great man theory."⁷⁴ The standard way for Tibetan sources to account for historical change is to attribute it, in a manner that consistently underplays the role of institutions, groups, and communities, to the intervention of certain "mighty" individuals. While it is important to recognize this fact, it should also be acknowledged that the depictions of these personages and the dramatic impact of their actions are not always lacking in substance. It is impossible, for instance, to make sense of the rapid changes in the scholastic scene during the decades in question without taking Tsong Khapa, and his almost immediate and somewhat transformative effect, into account. Karl-Heinz Everding suggests that Tsong Khapa's expositions had a major effect on the scholastic community, and even contributed to the eventual demise of Sangpu.⁷⁵ But as he correctly remarks, the power of such expositions to shape events is easily exaggerated.⁷⁶ Tsong Khapa's works carried no revolutionary message, nor any program for reforming religious institutions or society. Besides this, as stated above, it cannot be presumed that developments in the intellectual or literary spheres immediately (or indeed ever) manifested on the institutional level. Tsong Khapa's popularity and the eventual rise of the Geluk have every bit as much to do with institutions as individuals, and a far greater understanding of the structures and volatilities within the scholastic scene is required before the impact of specific individuals can realistically be evaluated. Moreover, with regard to titles, there are good reasons for distinguishing between the commentarial and the educational spheres.

By the final decades of the fourteenth century, the "four pillars" (*ka bzhi* or *dka' chen bzhi*) was the highest title that scholars could aim to achieve. This was the title

⁷⁴ Set out in Carlyle's *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*, first published in 1841. See Carlyle 2013.

⁷⁵ Everding 2009, p. 143.

⁷⁶ Everding 2009, p. 143.

that Tsong Khapa himself gained, at the end of his “test tour,”⁷⁷ which seems to have been completed somewhere between 1380 and 1385. His biography contains a vital piece of evidence about the change in the titles. It states: “He said that even though, at that time, one would have been permitted to do a test tour on ten or more treatises, in the monastic centers at that time, the custom of performing a test tour on other texts had not been popularized.”⁷⁸ The way that this is phrased in the biography makes it likely that Tsong Khapa himself was the source of the information.⁷⁹ Contextually, the “other texts” here refer to treatises not belonging to those agreed to represent the areas of the “four pillars.” Tsong Khapa’s biographer (and Tsong Khapa himself) appear to be rationalizing (and perhaps to some extent even justifying) the choices of the past. He walked away with the “four pillars” title because that was the highest one available, although by the time the biography was composed, this was no longer the case. This achievement had been overtaken by events; namely, the introduction of the “ten pillars.” What we glean from this passage is that whatever his influence elsewhere, Tsong Khapa had no direct impact in the titular domain. Indeed, the suggestion is that he simply accepted the status quo, rather than mounting any sort of challenge to it.

In terms of the shift in titles, interrogation of the sources leads us away from the actions of Tsong Khapa to those of Gyeltsap Darma Rinchen (rGyal tshab Dar ma rin chen; 1364–1432), an individual who is generally described as one of Tsong Khapa’s two chief disciples, and his official successor as the first holder of the throne of Ganden (dGa’ ldan), following Tsong Khapa’s passing in 1419. An investigation of events serves as a reminder that whatever image later religious tradition has sought to construct of him, Gyeltsap cannot be understood solely in terms of relations with his “master.” Far from being a mere protégé of Tsong Khapa, Gyeltsap (who was only seven years junior to Tsong Khapa) was a person with an independent intellectual life. Lechen Kunga Gyeltsen (Las chen Kun dga’ rgyal mtshan; 1432–1506), writing in 1494, reports that the episode considered here occurred just prior to Gyeltsap’s first meeting with Tsong Khapa.⁸⁰ It appears to illustrate that, at least in the area in question, Gyeltsap’s atti-

⁷⁷ The “test tour” (*grwa skor*) was the institutionalized scholastic practice of a monk submitting for public examination. This frequently occurred at the end of formal study, and as the name suggests, often involved monks traveling to a number of monastic institutions. The nature of this practice at the time is discussed more thoroughly in Samuels 2020b.

⁷⁸ mKhas grub dGe legs dpal bzang 1982, p. 34.

⁷⁹ Tibetan has no subjunctive, meaning that the words *mdzad pas chog pa yod* might be translated either as “one would have been permitted” or “one was permitted.” This is an important distinction, but as will become apparent, in the present context, the first seems to have been closest to the author’s intended meaning. That is, his is a retrospective gaze; a musing that such a test tour would have been possible in theory.

⁸⁰ Las chen Kun dga’ rgyal mtshan 2003, p. 723.

tudes to the established order and the exercising of personal choices differed markedly from those of Tsong Khapa.⁸¹

Unlike Tsong Khapa, Gyeltsap received the “ten pillars” title. In previous studies he is represented as only “one of the earlier scholars to obtain the title,”⁸² and the first to obtain the title at Sakya.⁸³ But references in sources from the time hint that there was something unusual about Gyeltsap’s test tour; that is, the procedure that led to his being awarded a scholastic title. Even Geluk historians remain strangely muted on what turns out to have been Gyeltsap’s critical role in the events.⁸⁴ Neither is there any institutional or anecdotal memory of Gyeltsap’s action. The fact that Gyeltsap received a title that superficially appears superior to that of Tsong Khapa may partly explain Geluk historians’ reticence to discuss the matter. But we find at least one unequivocal reference to it by a Geluk author, although some four centuries after the event. Tuken Lozang Chökyi Nyima (Thu’u bkwan Blo bzang chos kyi nyi ma; 1737–1802) mentions it in his *Grub mtha’ shel kyi me long* (Crystal Mirror of Philosophical Tenets), composed in 1801, where he states:

Up until Gyeltsap, the [premier title] was known as the “four great works” (*bka’ chen bzhi*). Even though some supplemented [the four] and did a test tour on six or more [texts, the title they received] was still referred to exclusively as the “four.” But from the time that Gyeltsap Je started the tradition of providing an explanation (*bshad pa*) on ten volumes, the tradition of referring to it as the “ten text” began.⁸⁵

The author suggests that even prior to Gyeltsap, the number in the title was not always literal, and that some individuals took their final tests in more than the prescribed four texts/topics. The veracity of this account of practices performed four centuries earlier cannot be taken as read, although there is a ring of credibility to it, especially in its deconstruction of literality. But even if this report is accurate, it remains unclear whether these purported departures from the count of four were cases of institutional or individual variation. Also, even this acknowledgement that Gyeltsap’s test was a gamechanger

⁸¹ Our ability to understand Gyeltsap as an individual is hampered by the lack of biographical materials relating to him. The reason that nothing substantial seems to have been written about his life should itself be a matter of interest.

⁸² Dreyfus 2003, p. 144.

⁸³ Tarab 2000, p. 14.

⁸⁴ Panchen Sönam Drakpa (Pañchen bSod nams grags pa; 1478–1554) is typical. In his *bKa’ gdams gsar rnying gi chos ’byung yid kyi mdzes rgyan*, he mentions only that Gyeltsap did his test tour for the title at Sakya, Sangpu, and Tsetang (*Sa skya gsang phu rtse thang rnam su dka’ bcu’i grwa skor gnang*). Pañchen bSod nams grags pa 2001, p. 252. The same information is found in Las chen Kun dga’ rgyal mtshan 2003, p. 722.

⁸⁵ Thu’u bkwan Blo bzang chos kyi nyi ma 1985, p. 189.

does not discount the possibility that the new title was an institution-based initiative. Gyeltsap could, after all, merely have been the first recipient of the title having completed a new, expanded course of studies, created by one or more monastic center.

A clearer sense of the nature and impact of Gyeltsap's action can be gained by examining contemporary documents of the time, composed by authors who did not align themselves with the Geluk. That Gyeltsap's test created something of a stir can be determined from references to it in works such as the biography of Rongtön Sheja Kunrig (Rong ston Shes bya kun rig; 1367–1449). This contains sections on the exchanges that occurred between Gyeltsap and Rongtön, primarily in the context of what is clearly stated to be Gyeltsap's "ten pillar test" (*ka bcu'i grwa skor*). Records of such exchanges are rare, and this is an invaluable source regarding how tests were conducted. The examination context undoubtedly added weight to these exchanges (and probably contributed to their survival). The rivalry between Rongtön and Gyeltsap is evident, and the public examination offered an ideal platform for Rongtön to challenge Gyeltsap's authority.⁸⁶ The encounter between the two is reported to have occurred at Sangpu. The contemporary documents contain no exact itinerary for Gyeltsap's test tour, but there is no obvious reason to doubt the information of sources that appeared relatively soon after, that it encompassed all three of the primary centers of the day: Sakya, Sangpu, and Tsetang (rTse thang).⁸⁷

Even more valuable insights are provided by the biography of Bodong Chokle Namgyel (Bo dong Phyogs las rnam rgyal; 1376–1451).⁸⁸ Bodong is reported to have arrived at Sangpu while engaging in his own expansive test tour, where he happened to meet the renowned scholar Sangye Pel (Sangs rgyas dpal; 1348–1414). Over tea, the latter quizzed the subject about his tour. Bodong informed him that he was undertaking a fifteen-treatise tour. Apparently delighted at the news, the senior scholar remarked:

"Ten-topic master" (Bodong), everyone is said to be so astonished by Darma (Gyeltsap) and his performance of a ten-topic test. But now it can be said that this nephew-master is [undertaking a test] for which his age matches the number of volumes!⁸⁹

⁸⁶ There is no mention in Rongtön's biography or other contemporary sources of any subsequent encounters between Gyeltsap and Rongtön. It must be concluded, therefore, that when Pema Karpo (Padma dkar po; 1527–1592), in his *Chos 'byung bstan pa'i padma rgyas pa'i nyin byed* (1968, p. 384), mentions a debate between these two at Sangpu, he is referring to none other than this event. His brief account (quoted in full by Everding 2009, p. 140) is inconsistent in almost every respect with that in Rongtön's biography (with whom his sympathies obviously lay) and can at best be seen as a colorful reimagining of events.

⁸⁷ See n. 84.

⁸⁸ *Ngo mtshar gyi dga' ston*, composed by his disciple, Jikmey Bang ('Jigs med 'bangs; d.u.).

⁸⁹ 'Jigs med 'bangs 1991, p. 71. In the biography, Bodong is regularly referred to as "the nephew," due to his relation to Pang Lotsawa Lodrö Tenpa (Pang lo tsā ba Blo gros brtan pa; 1276–1342). He

Two incidents in Rongtön's biography indicate friction between Sangye Pel and Gyeltsap.⁹⁰ Thus, the former may well have welcomed the prospect of the latter's achievement being surpassed. In literary terms, Sangye Pel serves as a convenient device. Overtly, Bodong's biography divulges little about his reasons for venturing from his native province of Tsang (*gTsang*) to that of Ü (*dBus*) to perform his test tour. But there is a strong suspicion that this exchange, and specifically Sangye Pel's words, give us a glimpse of Bodong's own motives. It does not seem plausible that he hit upon the idea of embarking on a "ten pillar" test tour independently. The remarkable resemblance of his undertaking to that of Gyeltsap and the cited exchange seem to confirm that this was a barely disguised attempt not just to emulate, but to outdo Gyeltsap's achievement.

More generally, as to why Bodong might have sought to outshine Gyeltsap, an observation about the scholarly milieu of the time is in order. It cannot be stated, with certainty, that the decades in question saw an increased spirit of scholarly competitiveness. But in hagiographical writings, where the practice of recounting a subject's exploits and feats, partly as a means of advertising his superiority over his peers, was already a well-established one, we note a pronounced willingness to "quantify" this superiority in material (i.e., textual) terms. For instance, in their respective biographies, Tsong Khapa's expository powers⁹¹ are communicated by relating how he had surpassed the number of treatises another exceptional scholar had been able to teach in a single session, whereas Bodong's compositional abilities are conveyed in terms of his authoring more works, simultaneously, than any rival.⁹² It seems unlikely that this was confined purely to the imagination of hagiographical writers. The text was a quantifiable resource; exploits measured in this metric could be viewed effectively as records, which enticed others to better them.⁹³ It is, however, in the domain of the test tour that we seem to witness the translation of a competitive mentality into its most substantial form. The inclusion in Bodong's biography of these comments about Gyeltsap's "ten-topic" tour can hardly be accounted for unless it was regarded as an unprecedented event—most likely because Gyeltsap was either the first to attempt the feat in general, or the first to do so at the major centers. Testing occurred, as Rongtön's biography corroborates, at Sangpu, which our sources depict as the preeminent

was, at best, a grand nephew of this figure. See below for clarification regarding the equation of text numbers with age.

⁹⁰ On two occasions in Shakya Chokden's biography of Rongtön, the latter is pushed into the role of defender of Sangye Pel, his teacher, against Gyeltsap.

⁹¹ mKhas grub dGe legs dpal bzang 1982, pp. 42–43.

⁹² 'Jigs med 'bangs 1991, pp. 225–30.

⁹³ These often seem to be expressed with implied reference to the "expounding, debating, composition" formula.

scholastic center of the time. As the institution appears to have sanctioned the event, it can hardly have been viewed as anything other than setting a new benchmark, thereby guaranteeing that others would seek to emulate it.

A comparison of the available sources allows us to tentatively date Gyeltsap's test to the final decade of the fourteenth century (probably between 1395–1398). As for Bodong's test, according to his biography, he took it at the age of twenty-three. Hence, it must have occurred very soon after Gyeltsap's, in 1398 or 1399.⁹⁴ No record of the texts Gyeltsap was tested on has yet come to light. But of the various others who followed in his wake, the biographies of two—Bodong himself and Dönyö Pel (Don yod dpal; 1398–1423)⁹⁵—contain lists of the texts they were tested on during their final test tours. Bodong's biography identifies the texts of his test as: *Pramāṇavārttika*, *Abhisamayālaṃkāra*, *Vinayasūtra*, *Abhidharmasamuccaya*, *Māhāyānasūtrālaṃkāra*, *Madhyāntavibhāga*, *Uttaratantraśāstra*, *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, *Madhyamakāvatāra*, *Catuhśataka*, *Madhyamakahrdaya*, *Satyadvayavibhāga*, *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, *Tshad ma rigs gter* (Sakya Pandita's *Treasury of Reasoning*), and *Madhyamakālaṃkāra*.⁹⁶ Dönyö Pel took his final test tour when he was twenty-five (i.e., in 1423–1424). His biography contains a list of thirteen texts on which he was tested. These were the (texts of the) “four pillars,” the remaining four treatises of Maitreya (*Mahāyānasūtrālaṃkāra*, *Madhyāntavibhāga*, *Uttaratantraśāstra*, and *Dharmadharmatā-vibhāga*), *Abhidharmasamuccaya*, *Mahāyānasamgraha*, *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, *Madhyamakāvatāra*, and *Suhṛllekha*.⁹⁷

The discussion surrounding testing in Bodong's biography is highly illuminating. As with Gyeltsap in Rongtön's biography, figures who address Bodong, both during and subsequent to his testing, refer to him by the title “[master] of ten topics” (*dka' bcu pa*). But the number of texts listed obviously exceeds ten in number. First, therefore, we see that even during the early years of its appearance, the “ten” of the title was not a literal designation.⁹⁸ Bodong became the master of ten, despite being tested on fifteen texts.

⁹⁴ Sangye Pel's comment that the number of texts Bodong was to be tested on matched his age exercised hyperbolic licence. It also seems to conflate two separate occasions. Bodong's first test tour, according to his biography, was undertaken when he was sixteen ('Jigs med 'bangs 1991, p. 43). But it was devoted solely to the topic of *pramāṇa* (logic and epistemology). Hence, in terms of his test tours, when Bodong is (almost) the right age for the comment to make sense, there were insufficient texts, and when there were (almost) a sufficient number of texts (i.e., during the later tour), he was the wrong age.

⁹⁵ This biography, *Amogha shrībhatra'i rnam par thar pa skal bzang skyed dgu'i dang ba 'dren byed*, was composed by his disciple, Shākya Chokden (Shākya mchog ldan 2006). The author refers to Dönyö Pel by a Sanskritised version of his name. Hence, in the printed version his name is rendered Amogha Shribhatra (*sic*).

⁹⁶ 'Jigs med 'bangs 1991, p. 65.

⁹⁷ Shākya mchog ldan 2006, pp. 54–55.

⁹⁸ Content-wise the ten are totally unrelated to the aforementioned ten branches of learning. But the recurrence of the number here, with similar implications of extensiveness, seems worthy of note.

The lack of literalness with regard to the number already suggests that any attempt to identify an original group of ten core texts, agreed throughout the scholastic community at the time, which might in any way be described as a fixed “curriculum” is doomed to failure, not to say misguided. But reports on how Bodong approached his test deliver the final blow to the idea of this supposed fixed curriculum. His biography recounts how, originally, he requested that his teacher grant him permission to embark on a thirteen-text test tour.⁹⁹ We can infer that his texts resembled those of Gyeltsap. But subsequently, the thirteen was boosted to fifteen, apparently through the addition of *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, and Sakya Pandita’s *Treasury of Reasoning*. What is more, he was still amending the list of texts right up until the last moment of his test at Sangpu. The final addition, the *Treasury of Reasoning*, Sakya Pandita’s major opus on *pramāṇa*, seemed to occur on a whim, when (if the biography is to be believed), Bodong spontaneously responded in the affirmative to Sangye Pel’s question about whether he intended to include it. No objections to this are reported from the side of the monastic institution in question. Sangye Pel’s reported delight at this news may well suggest that the text had not featured in Gyeltsap’s earlier test. But in the ad hoc nature of the addition it is clear that Bodong approached his test as Gyeltsap must have done before him; namely, by *choosing* the texts he wished to be tested on. There was *no* predetermined list of texts drawn up or stipulated by the monastic institution.

A Discourse on Categories

Attempts to identify a corpus of ten texts that the whole scholastic community of the time is supposed to have agreed on, and which could also be described as a “curriculum,” is not only a misguided one, it ignores certain scholarly discourses that were driving change. Foremost among these—clues to which can be gleaned from the contents of Bodong and Dönyö Pel’s lists—was that on the relation between texts and categories. It is helpful here to compare the scholasticism of the period with that of later times. As alluded to above, the topics of the “four pillars” seem remarkably similar to the five topics of the later Geluk curriculum: aside from the absence of Madhyamaka from the former, the two are identical. But this resemblance is deceptive. There are two key concepts that underpin the Geluk notion of a scholastic curriculum: (1) that it consists of a limited number of distinct and clearly-defined areas or categories of textual learning; and (2) that each of these area categories has a primary and definitive treatise, often described as a “root text” (*rtsa ba* or *rtsa ba’i gzhung*)—a work translated from Sanskrit. The idea of the root is obviously not exclusive to the Geluk model. It is fundamental to the structure of Buddhist commentarial writings in general, and central to the way that treatises like the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* of Nāgārjuna (ca. 150–ca. 250)

⁹⁹ Jigs med ’bangs 1991, p. 56.

and the *Pramāṇasamuccaya* of Dignāga (ca. 480–ca. 540) are understood to relate to subsequent writings. But there is an extra dimension to the root in the Geluk model, associated with organized learning. Each of the area categories is seen as an *essential* field for scholastics. These are, according to the earlier three-way divide relating to monastic learning, only those topics that monastic authorities prescribe and organize study of (as opposed to those that they simply encourage or tolerate an interest in). Each of the roots here is regarded as the most representative work for that area category; not necessarily the sole means of access to it, but the one around which learning of it should be organized. This is reflected in the model's components—its educational materials, graduated classes, and examination system. In practice, the perceived need to concentrate on mastering these definitive texts can be used as a rationale for limiting engagement with other works, even those belonging to the same area category. Geluk scholasticism is, consequently, often criticized for its lack of interest in what falls outside the immediate curriculum. In medieval times, institutional learning was less circumscribed, and there were significant differences in attitudes with respect to (among other things) categories and texts. The development of the “four pillars” during the medieval period, however, may itself be construed as a step towards a more demarcated form of scholasticism. The list of works Dönyö Pel was tested on refers to “the [texts of the] four pillars.” This may already seem to imply the idea that each of the four areas had a definitive text.¹⁰⁰ But it is only later that we encounter unambiguous evidence that such ideas had been incorporated into the organization of learning, at least in Geluk establishments. Less than a century after the decades in question, for instance, the biography of Chökyi Gyeltsen (Chos kyi rgyal mtshan; 1469–1544) talks of the “root treatises of the four great difficult [topics],”¹⁰¹ conveying that the four area categories of the scholastic title were each represented by a single, agreed text.¹⁰² During the period considered here, some momentum towards the notions of essential categories and representative roots can be detected. But neither concept was settled and (as we see below) scholasticism seems to have toyed with alternatives.

Some idea of the scholarly discourse about categories and texts, and how this impacted on organized study, can be gained by looking at the areas represented by each of the “four pillars.” *Vinaya*, the most basic area of monastic learning, easily lent itself to the idea of an essential category. Tibetan scholars had translated a large portion of scriptural writings and up to twenty extensive commentaries on the topic from Sanskrit. But as Bodong's list corroborates, the *Vinayasūtra* (Tib. *'Dul ba mdo rtsa ba*)

¹⁰⁰ See also the reference to the distinction by Lechen Kunga Gyeltsen (Las chen Kun dga' rgyal mtshan; 1432–1506), *dKa' chen bzhi dang / dbu ma rtsa 'jug* (2003, pp. 723–24).

¹⁰¹ bDe legs nyi ma 1975, p. 5b.

¹⁰² This biography, entitled *dNgos grub gyi char 'bebs*, was composed by his disciple, Delek Nyima (bDe legs nyi ma; d.u.).

of Guṇaprabha (394–468) was now largely accepted in Tibet as the definitive work on the topic. The main remaining question seems to have been whether formal study of the *Prātimokṣasūtra*—the only work attributed directly to the Buddha that appears in any of the “authoritative” (*gzhung chen*) collections—was also necessary. *Abhidharma* was, similarly, an inherited category, but the question of the definitive text had not been resolved. There were two candidates: Vasubandhu’s *Abhidharmakośa* and Asaṅga’s *Abhidharmasamuccaya*. The two treatises respectively present non-Mahayana and Mahayana visions of *abhidharma*. There were apparently differences of opinion on which one was more appropriate for institutionalized learning in Tibetan monasteries. No such questions arose for the third area, the avowedly Mahayana topic of *prajñāpāramitā*.¹⁰³ There was consensus that the *Abhisamayālaṅkāra*, which is attributed to Maitreya, was the most representative treatise, around which study should be organized.¹⁰⁴ But outside the *prajñāpāramitā* category itself, there were questions about the status of the other four Maitreya treatises. Earlier Sangpu commentators had shown great interest in *Uttaratantraśāstra*, another of these works, suggesting that they viewed it as essential. Bodong only chose to be tested on four of the Maitreya treatises.¹⁰⁵ Dönyö Pel was not only tested on all five; his list (unlike Bodong’s) refers to them collectively. Even in describing them as “the remaining four treatises of Maitreya” this list hints at the issue of intersection, since the *Abhisamayālaṅkāra* appeared to belong to two separate categories, that is, as both a treatise associated with the “pillars” and one of the works of Maitreya, perhaps casting doubt on just how “essential” each of these categories was to scholasticism.¹⁰⁶

The last of the “four pillar” categories was *pramāṇa*, the very mainstay of Sangpu scholasticism. The early Sangpu tradition had regarded *Pramāṇaviniścaya* (Tib. *Tshad ma rnam nges*) as something akin to Dharmakīrti’s definitive work on the topic. But Sakya Pandita advocated that the *Pramāṇavārttika* should be regarded as such. This difference of opinion is regularly cited as one of the supposedly fundamental issues that separated the two “rival systems” (i.e., the *sa rngogs lugs*, mentioned above). But

¹⁰³ In this context, *prajñāpāramitā* is a standard rendering of the Tibetan *phar phyin*. This is not entirely satisfactory. It could give the impression that the topic was simply inherited from Indian Buddhism and perhaps even one that involves direct study of a portion of the scriptural corpus (i.e., the *Prajñāpāramitā* sutras). Neither of these is correct; as a category, *phar phyin* is, largely, a Tibetan creation.

¹⁰⁴ It seems likely that this is the text referred to in Bodong’s list (as *phar phyin*).

¹⁰⁵ Bodong’s list excludes the *Dharmadharmatāvibhāga*. In the later collections, such as the thirteen, the Maitreya treatises would belong to a distinct category, that of *rGya chen spyod pa* (“Vast Conduct,” discussed by Pearcey 2015, p. 453), whereas in some later versions of the eighteen, they form a separate group, to which was added the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*.

¹⁰⁶ Fundamental to the eventual formation of the scholastic “canon” and learning organized around it was the idea that the categories were not of Tibetan origin, but ultimately reflected the intention of the great Indian masters and even the Buddha himself.

by the decades in question, any difference was on the verge of resolution, as the majority of scholars now sided with Sakya Pandita's position on the definitiveness of the *Pramāṇavārttika*. This agreement is reflected in trends of commentarial authorship—writings on the *Pramāṇavārttika* had increased and become standard, whereas those on the *Pramāṇaviniścaya* gradually declined. More importantly here, sources (particularly biographical writings) indicate commensurate patterns in institutional learning related to these trends. But the *Pramāṇavārttika* also had its own “root,” since it was a commentary on Dignāga's *Pramāṇasamuccaya*, and there was uncertainty about whether formal learning of the latter was still required or whether thorough study of the *Pramāṇavārttika* made this unnecessary.

As the only Tibetan author with writings included in any of the collections, Sakya Pandita, it should be remarked, held a unique position with respect to the “authoritative works.” Two of his works, the *Treasury of Reasoning* and *sDom gsum rab dbye* (Differentiation of the Three Classes of Vows), regularly appear in versions of the eighteen. Later, when the thirteenfold collection was formulated, these works were to be excluded. The issue of indigeneity, that is, whether a Tibetan author's writings should be included in the fundamental scholastic corpus, appears, indirectly, to have been a consideration in that choice.¹⁰⁷ During the period in question here, even if the controversy was not expressed in such terms, the *Treasury of Reasoning* certainly posed questions to scholastic traditions. Uniquely for a Tibetan scholastic work, it had spawned a major commentarial tradition of its own (seeming thereby to fulfil the basic criterion of a *gzhung*). That said, it would be a mistake to suggest that it was an established part of a scholastic canon, let alone a fixture within a standardized curriculum. Dönyö Pel was apparently not tested on the work, and neither, in all likelihood, was Gyeltsap. What is more, even though Bodong chose it as one of his texts, this was neither a statement of recognition nor endorsement. As his biography recounts, Bodong had major reservations about Sakya Pandita's interpretation, and within a few years of his test, Bodong was called on to publicly defend his, by then well-known criticisms of the *Treasury of Reasoning*. Bodong was not alone in challenging the text's authoritativeness.

¹⁰⁷ The thirteenfold collection was created in the early twentieth century and was essentially an edited version of the eighteenfold one. Thus, Sakya Pandita holds the dubious joint honor of being the sole Tibetan author to have been represented in and effectively “purged” from *gzhung chen* collections. The formation of the latter collection has largely been portrayed as heralding “a return to classical Indian Buddhism” (Pearcey 2015, p. 455). But as Pearcey's discussion suggests, there was far more than this to its creation. Quite aside from the question of whether native writers belonged in the “authoritative works” category, Sakya Pandita's association with the logico-epistemological tradition was unquestionably a factor here. Perhaps the most obvious difference between the two collections is that all the works relating to logic and epistemology (which had essentially formed the backbone of the earlier Tibetan scholastic tradition) were excluded from the thirteenfold collection. The formation of the thirteen, therefore, exemplifies both debates and expressions of authority in the curricula field during later times.

It would appear that he chose to be tested on the work because he saw it as an opportunity to display his intellectual prowess, while simultaneously voicing his criticisms of Sakya Pandita. None of this is compatible with the idea that the *Treasury of Reasoning* or the test on it were associated with any sort of established curriculum.

As already observed, Madhyamaka was not one of the “pillars.” This cannot be seen as a reflection of its importance to scholars of the time, many of whom wrote and taught prolifically on individual treatises. If it had not yet secured a place for itself in the official study and testing programs, this was at least partly due to the fact that notions of it as a distinct category were still somewhat vague. There was also no agreement about a representative treatise. Nāgārjuna’s *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* was viewed as an essential work, and there was also a growing sense of the indispensability of Candrakīrti’s *Madhyamakāvatāra*. But beyond this, scholars seem to have made limited progress in demarcating the category. Dönyö Pel’s list contains the aforementioned two works, but no others now identified as Madhyamaka treatises. By contrast, Bodong’s list has six or seven (depending on how exactly the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* was being approached). Dönyö Pel’s list also includes another of the six treatises attributed to Nāgārjuna, the *Suhṛllekha*. And paralleling the issue of the Maitreya treatises, some clearly thought that Nāgārjuna’s works should be treated collectively as a separate scholastic category.

The numbers referenced in the scholastic titles did not, it is now apparent, refer to any sort of standardized curriculum, but equally, neither did they denote ten or more works that can be characterized as an agreed canonical corpus. There was, at the time, what could better be described as a *pool* of Sanskrit-origin scholarly works, rather than a canon, with general agreement about which works belonged to it. But there is no evidence of attempts to restrict the scholarly corpus to a small group of ten or so works—a count that would necessarily have excluded the majority of writings by the most important figures of the Indian Buddhist scholarly tradition, including Nāgārjuna, Dignāga, Śāntarakṣita (700–760), Jñānagarbha (ca. 700–760), and Bhāvaviveka (ca. 490–570), among others. With respect to that pool of treatises, debates about attribution and authenticity had largely been settled. Discourse was more inclined towards determining where these works stood in relation to each other and embraced matters of doxography, hermeneutics, and hierarchy. However abstruse the discussions about definitiveness, representativeness, and the relative authority of treatises may appear, the main interlocutors, it should be remembered, were committed scholastics, who saw the transmission of knowledge within their monastic communities as a fundamental duty. The interface between the intellectual and educational, although hitherto largely ignored by modern scholarship, is an obvious one.

Calculated Acts and Unintended Consequences: The Impact of Gyeltsap's Test

The impact of Gyeltsap's action can partly be measured in terms of the popularity that the new title immediately gained. His test seems to have taken place only ten to fifteen years after Tsong Khapa's, with its implicit acceptance of the "four pillars" order. But within a decade, the new title associated with Gyeltsap's test appears to have surpassed the earlier one in popularity. To the generation born after 1364 (i.e., the year of Gyeltsap's birth), including major figures such as Bodong, Rongtön, and Khedrup, the "four pillars" title was unsatisfactory. Both they and their biographers wanted only the new title attached to their names.¹⁰⁸ In Rongtön's biography, Shakya Chokden's observation about the time is that, "In the celebrated monastic centers of central Tibet, the number of texts for the final test (*grwa skor*) was just ten."¹⁰⁹ This suggests a practice that had gone beyond a mere fashion; monastic centers had institutionalized such multitreatise tests and set an upper limit of around ten. Shakya Chokden was clearly keen to get across the point about the cap on text numbers, and the context in which his observation appears also helps explain why some studies have confused litanies of treatises with curricula. Biographers juxtaposed comments about testing practices with long lists of works studied to make a point about the breadth of their subjects' learning. That is, the aim was to convey that these individuals' knowledge was so prodigious that they could have been tested on all of these works, *if the system had allowed this*. This message is even less subtle in Bodong's biography than Rongtön's. It proclaims, "At that time . . . if he (Bodong) had been [permitted], he could have been [tested] on around a hundred volumes of the vast and the profound!"¹¹⁰ Rhetoric notwithstanding, that these changes in the titular sphere were significant and of potential historical note was not lost on some biographers, including Bodong's. Wishing, no doubt, to ensure that his subject would mean more to posterity than "the great emulator," he declared that, "This noble [master] founded the tradition of the test tour that exceeded ten texts."¹¹¹ Bodong's biographer appears to claim that his master's contribution was a momentous one; that he was essentially responsible for development of the *rab 'byams* examination and, therefore, the last of the three scholastic degrees referred to above. The chronology of the title's emergence requires investigation. In terms of initiative, there may well be some validity to the claim, but in terms of intentionality, this retrospective reading of Bodong's action is surely over-generous.

¹⁰⁸ There are, however, curiously few details in biographical and other writings about how figures such as Rongtön and Khedrup received their titles. One wonders whether some tests were less than glorious affairs.

¹⁰⁹ Shākya mchog ldan 2004, p. 28.

¹¹⁰ Jigs med 'bangs 1991, p. 80.

¹¹¹ Jigs med 'bangs 1991, p. 80.

As interesting as the new title's appearance, immediate popularity, and speedy institutionalization are in themselves, further examination of Gyeltsap's action promises further insights. Thus, in the final section, we delve into its motives, consequences, and what it reveals about the institutions of the time. First, how much intentionality can be read into what Gyeltsap did? If, based on various reports and circumstantial evidence, the dating of his "ten pillar" test is correct, he was already in his early to mid-thirties when he undertook it. This is a point of significance. Customarily, monks of the time seemingly aimed to complete their final test tour by no later than their mid-twenties. The multitext test tour was a one-time event. It was the symbolic end of formal learning; the point of reaching scholarly maturity, and not something that could be repeated and "bettered" at a later date. This final, public test already, therefore, created pressure on candidates, who would surely have been keen to acquit themselves well, and perhaps even deliver something special. But customs aside, there was no definite rule about when the test tour should be undertaken. There is nothing to suggest extenuating circumstances in Gyeltsap's case, or any breaks in study, or such like, which might have caused his test to be delayed. Thus, the most plausible explanation is that Gyeltsap made a conscious decision not to follow the established convention, but essentially to defer his final test. This, as much as the content, gives the impression of a calculated action.

Investigation of these events allows us to make two significant conclusions. These relate to our understanding of (1) the "system" at the time, particularly the respective roles of, and relations between, institutions and individuals; and (2) the longer-term impact on models of learning and curricula. With regard to the first, even with the sparseness of available evidence, the idea that the introduction of the "ten pillars" can be viewed as a straightforward curricula expansion is shown to be without foundation. There is simply no basis for assuming that a standardized, ten-text curriculum existed. Even at its inception, the number in the title was not used in a literal fashion: the texts involved did not number ten in the two earliest documented cases. Neither can they have matched each other in content. That the "ten pillars" subsequently developed into a fully standardized title, associated with a specific group of texts, is a possibility, but a somewhat remote one. Only a few decades after the introduction of the "ten pillars," the "myriad" (*rab 'byams*) title emerged. Whatever Bodong's part in this, its appearance seems difficult to account for unless there were already perceived inadequacies with the "ten pillars." The wish to end the disparity between the name and the number of texts involved is conceivable—the *rab 'byams* removes the number-specificity in favor of the vaguer "myriad" formulation. But objections to the cap also seem likely. The new title did not immediately supplant the "ten pillars": the latter lingered for centuries. But even this longevity does not mean that it developed into a standardized, cross-institution degree, based on mastery of a single group of texts. In all likelihood, different

institutions had their own versions. The parallel existence that the title enjoyed in the medical domain offers partial support for this. With the institutionalization of Tibetan medical learning from the seventeenth century onwards, the “ten difficult areas” (*dka' bcu*) appears simply to have been borrowed from the monastic sphere, as a degree title. In the present-day system, such a title is still awarded, but the “ten” is devoid of any literal content: learning and examination is not organized around any tenfold enumeration of texts or areas of knowledge.

Returning to the issue of authority, the events considered here are extremely informative about relations between institutions and individuals at the time. Although it may seem logical to assume that when a new premier title is introduced, a “system” or authority—some monastic institution, organizational body housed within it, or non-educational entity (a regime, state, etc.)—must have been responsible, analysis of accounts about what transpired dispel such an idea. Here, the reverse was apparently the case—the actions were those of individuals. True, the monastic centers, such as Sangpu, were essential. Gyeltsap’s action could have had no meaning nor even have occurred without the structure and context of the embodied institutional learning that these centers provided. But at best, these centers allowed and accommodated the actions; essentially, their role seems to have been reflexive. In terms of the initiative, change came about through individuals: the innovation of one, and the subsequent attempts of others, to emulate his achievement.

Moving to the second conclusion, we will now consider the longer-term impact and ramifications of Gyeltsap’s actions with regard to the curricula domain and models of learning. Evaluating these requires us to venture into what is admittedly more speculative territory. The significance of the creation of the “four pillars” has not, I believe, either in terms of its intellectual or educational dimensions, been fully appreciated. This title was the product of several centuries of scholarly processing and organization. Here, apparently for the first time, the Tibetan tradition had gained the self-confidence to formally divide scholarly knowledge into distinct fields, determine which should constitute “official” areas (and what lay outside their boundaries), then set about organizing learning and testing around them. But despite the resemblance of the “four pillars” to later, fully-fledged curricula of four or five topics, the division lacked solidity. The consensus formed around the “four pillars” had existed for a number of decades (perhaps even more than a century). But the arrangement harbored two fundamental fragilities. First, there was the unresolved category versus text issue. Were the “great four” of the title to be understood as areas or specific treatises? Accordingly, was institutional testing supposed to judge mastery of area categories or individual texts? The invention of the “four pillars” itself seems to demonstrate that the gradual momentum was towards adopting a representative model; that is, where the fields of learning were clearly delineated, restricted in number, and each was embodied by a definitive treatise.

But that consensus seems not to have been resolute, meaning that this momentum might be obstructed or even reversed. Second, even within the monastic institutions themselves, monks were learning and expected to learn far more than was contained within these four areas. At a cursory glance, Gyeltsap's choice to undertake a multitext test could seem like a pedestrian and unimaginative extension of what preceded—merely an increase in quantity. But personally, I am not inclined to interpret it in this way. Gyeltsap appears to have been the first to seriously pose the question (perhaps mischievously), “Why not include some of these other texts (that many of us are studying) within the domain of the final examination?” As far as can be ascertained, this question was one to which the major monastic institutions (or the system they promoted) had no immediate response, other than to acquiesce, and apparently embrace and institutionalize the idea of a “ten pillars” title. Gyeltsap's act might, therefore, be interpreted as an incendiary one. Perhaps suspecting that the system was insufficiently robust to resist this move, he forced the issue. Up until this point, the exact extent of control that monastic centers exercised in the sphere of testing is unclear, although hosting these events and being involved in their processes surely implies some form of regulatory function. But with Gyeltsap's action, the initiative for determining the content of testing would seem to have been wrested from them, and to have lain, at least temporarily, in the hands of individuals bold enough to want to outdo their peers. This may not have resulted in testing being plunged into total chaos or descending into a free-for-all, but with the structure of the “four pillars” removed, some confusion about parameters and criteria must have ensued. By implication, the position that this placed monastic centers in would have been an unenviable one. If the content of testing for the highest title they offered was to be decided by the examinee, what remaining role was there for them? Were they simply to serve as stages for these events? Thus, even if there is uncertainty about how exactly this played out, we perceive at least the potential of a diminished role for the monasteries, in which they might be reduced to mere stations and hubs of activity, enjoying little or no say regarding the scholastic agenda.

Quite aside from the questions about roles and relations (institution-individual, examiner-examinee) that the introduction of the “ten pillars” is likely to have thrown up, there were also implications regarding the model of education. Organized around the “four pillars,” monastic centers appear to have succeeded in bringing some order to institutional-based learning and testing. But testing based on individual texts, as the surviving lists illustrate, seemed to pursue a more individualistic vision, based on personal choices. It appears to have given licence for candidates to dip into the “pool” almost arbitrarily, relying on the idea that anything within it could serve equally well as a valid basis for scholarly testing. This is somewhat incompatible with the model that had been developing up to this point, which conceived of area categories and representative texts. The natural conclusion of this development, with limited categories

and fewer, more definitive texts, would not have served the interests of audacious candidates concerned more with increasing numbers, for reasons of personal prestige, rather than any long-term vision or plan for education. Competitive expansion within the sphere of testing, of which the “ten pillars” was a primary expression, is unlikely to have fostered particularly constructive or respectful attitudes to an order built on categories, representation, and doxographic relations. It can be read as something of a rejection of the consensus that had formed around the four pillars.

Based on the evidence, it has been demonstrated that the introduction of the “ten pillars” was anything but a mere augmentation of what had preceded. It was also categorically *not*, as has been suggested, associated with a new curriculum, nor did it reflect anything approaching an agreed program of studies. Its significance in the sphere of curricula development, although real, is likely to have been almost the converse of what has previously been assumed. Evaluation of the limited sources available suggests that far from strengthening the structure built around the four, these additional pillars undermined, and even threatened to topple it. As such, it might be interpreted as a setback to curricula formation, or one that temporarily succeeded in arresting its progress. What unfolded in the decades and centuries following the new title’s introduction requires further investigation. But my sense is that until the introduction of the “myriad” title, and documented attempts to standardize it, the emergence of the “ten pillars” ushered in a brief period of flirtation with a more open approach to learning and testing, somewhat opposed to the direction in which the “four pillars” had been taking things. But the future that beckoned, the one that this approach offered, cannot have been perceived as especially inviting or attractive to many. For monastic centers in particular, facing the prospect of degraded authority, there was little to recommend it. The sustainability of the approach also seems questionable. If power was ceded to the individual, and the notion of the official was eroded, what exactly was the role or point of the monastic center? Once the first Geluk (or dGe ldan) monastic centers were established in the early to mid-fifteenth century, and had, by the end of that century, found their institutional voice, the model they cleaved to was decidedly representative. Gyeltsap himself, as Tsong Khapa’s successor, came (perhaps almost ironically) to symbolize this order. The founding of these centers marked a resurgence in monastic authority and far greater institutional control over education than had hitherto been seen. The most lasting impact of the “ten pillars” may have been its contribution to the process, in its helping to provoke an institutional reaction: the rejection of the more unregulated, institutional-light approach, something that manifested in greater rationalization of the curriculum, and the more centralized control for which the Geluk school is noted.

As stated above, Dreyfus has referred to two curricula models that currently separate Geluk from non-Geluk Tibetan monastic centers, with the first pursuing a more restrictive, five-topic curriculum, and the latter favoring a more expansive one, espe-

cially based on curricula of thirteen or eighteen *gzhung chen* collections. The more restricted (“four pillars”) and the more open (“ten pillars”) might seem to offer a parallel for these later curricula divisions, or even suggest the origins of this divide. I would caution against such a conclusion. The contrasts between the Geluk and non-Geluk schools are easily overstated. The categorical divisions, representative texts, and doxographic organization may be more rigid in the Geluk, but they are also found, in less concentrated form, in the curricula collections of the non-Geluk schools.¹¹² Neither are there any direct lines running from medieval times to the present. If anything, the “ten pillars” title, both in terms of the content associated with it and the circumstances of its introduction, suggests a more varied and less orderly historical picture than has previously been appreciated. It also ruffles the image of the scholastic realm as one characterized by smooth evolutionary processes.

Conclusion

This article has focused on Tibet, but has argued, more generally, that the notion of Buddhist monastic curricula and their historical development is worthy of greater attention. The more liberal usage of the term “curriculum” may be seen to encourage the sense that things conform to a single pattern. But there is no uniformity with regard to the various monastic contexts being referred to, nor even, necessarily, in what academics mean when they refer to a curriculum. Most importantly, this looser notion of what constitutes a curriculum seems ill-suited, analytically, to the exploration of the complexities of each individual situation. It may even hamper our ability to identify the stages and processes of curricula evolution. I have proposed that greater acuity might be brought to discussions about curricula development by considering where certain points of delineation lie; namely, between programs of study, as opposed to materials (texts, topics, or configurations of knowledge) that they might employ; between those subjects that monastic authority prescribes as opposed to merely indulges the study of; and between a monastery serving as an educational institution, engaged in the organization of courses of study, as opposed to simply serving as an intellectual hub. Furthermore, a weakness in studies related to Tibetan monastic learning, but also more widely in the field of Buddhist monastic curricula, is the limited information they provide regarding terminology relevant to the curricula sphere in the primary sources. It is only by providing clarity regarding such terminology that we are able to understand the development of native thinking and guard against concepts from later historical periods, or even other cultures, being imported into our readings of the past. Contributing to such clarification, this article has identified terminology and categories relevant to curricula and discussed how they seem to have informed

¹¹² See n. 107.

the organization of learning within a specific monastic context, between the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries in Tibet.

With regard to the issue of curricula in medieval Tibet, critical scrutiny here has chiefly been directed towards questions relating to (1) the tenfold scheme associated with Sakya Pandita, and (2) the “ten pillars” scholastic title, to both of which the term “curriculum” has been linked, most prominently by Dreyfus¹¹³ and Jackson¹¹⁴ respectively. In the case of the first, the claim that the scheme represented a curriculum is undermined by its vagueness. The evidence, both with regard to the scheme’s content and its historical implementation, is insufficient to establish that it represented a coherent program of monastic studies in medieval times. Historical references to the scheme are indeed numerous. But as to what these represent, beyond an expression of allegiance to a particular vision of learning, is unclear. There seems little enough reason to interpret these as literal records of an individual’s own course of studies, let alone reflective of the structure and organization of learning on the institutional level in medieval Tibet. The fact that they have been interpreted as the latter owes much to their association with Sakya Pandita. This is one example where passive acceptance of the traditional “great man theory” has clearly not aided understanding of the past.

Much of this article has been devoted to a case study investigating the introduction of the “ten pillars” scholastic title and its relation to the evolution of a medieval curriculum. Investigating the circumstances surrounding the title’s introduction has brought to light specific historical events and the role of certain individuals within them that seem largely to have been forgotten. But perhaps more significant than the events and individuals in question are the insights that this examination offers with regard to the organization of monastic learning during this particular period in medieval Tibet. As institutions, the monasteries appear to have been robust. But on the level of education, the picture is somewhat different from that of fixed practices and standardized systems depicted in previous studies. In terms of the scholastic title in question, something with real implications for the curricula domain, change was not the result of a top-down initiative. Indeed, we perhaps see evidence that the role of the monastic centers as education-provider was not entirely settled and was one that they may even have engaged in with some trepidation. Whatever order may have been achieved immediately prior to the decades in question, it was obviously susceptible to challenge. The extent to which individuals appear to have played a part in this seems surprising, and certainly calls upon us to question some assumptions about the relation between the individual and the institution, and indeed the nature of authority, in this context at the time. In endeavoring to understand the development of the curriculum and the

¹¹³ Dreyfus 2003.

¹¹⁴ Jackson 2007.

organization of monastic learning in medieval Tibet, as perhaps with numerous other related matters (including the formation of canons), the *construction of the official* is an area that surely requires greater attention.

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